

# ALDBOROUGH ROMAN TOWN PROJECT



2016 Excavation

Interim Report

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## Summary

*Excavation was carried out north of the English Heritage maintained mosaics (NGR 440492, 466311) in September 2016, directed by Rose Ferraby and Martin Millett, University of Cambridge. The works were undertaken as part of the Aldborough Roman Town Project, which has been mapping the area of Aldborough using geophysical survey since 2009. The site is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SM NY 436, HA 1003133) and scheduled monument consent was granted by Historic England to facilitate the excavation.*

## Introduction

The Aldborough Roman Town Project has been mapping the sub-surface remains in and around the village of Aldborough, North Yorkshire, since 2009. It has principally involved extensive magnetometry survey combined with topographic recording and the selective use of Ground-penetrating Radar (GPR) survey. This work has added greatly to our understanding of the town plan of *Isurium Brigantum*, and its extra-mural settlement (Ferraby and Millett forthcoming). The project has also drawn together the results of a campaign of fieldwalking at the site undertaken by the Yorkshire Archaeological Society in the 1980s and 1990s (Millett and Ferraby forthcoming). The second phase of the project is focused on refining our knowledge of the planning and chronology of the town's development. It involves further focused survey using GPR as well as selective re-excavation of previous trenches in order to evaluate the character of deposits, the character and volume of finds, and the preservation of the buried structures.

This work aims to approach the site as an urban centre; gaining an understanding of the Roman town as a whole. This contrasts with much earlier work that tended to be concerned with the town defences with an aim to reconstructing historical narratives. The initial targets for re-excavation are (i) the areas around the mosaics displayed in the English Heritage site, (ii) the north range of the Forum in front of the church, and (iii) buildings found in the 1920s in the north-east corner of the town. Work in 2016 concerned the first of these.

## Background

### Location

The excavation was carried out in the south-west part of the walled town, just to the north of the mosaics currently displayed in the English Heritage Guardianship site (see *figure 1* and *figure 2*). Ecroyd-Smith reports on the discovery of these two mosaics in 1832 and 1848, and reproduced a plan in his *Relique Isuriana* showing them in the context of other walls along with vignettes illustrating his excavations (1852: opposite p. 35). His plan shows that the mosaics were positioned in the west wing of a courtyard building with adjacent rooms containing hypocausts at its corner and in the north wing (*figure 2*). The two mosaics (Neal and Cosh 2002, nos. 123.13 showing a lion, and 123.14 a geometric design with eight petalled flower) were subsequently displayed in specially constructed small buildings, whilst

the other excavations are presumed to have been backfilled it is not known how long after the excavation this took place and whether or not the structures had been left exposed to the elements for long after excavation.

The results of our magnetometer survey in this area were obscured by the presence of surface rubble in the area around the mosaics, but showed a general coherence of the wall alignments with those drawn in the Ecroyd-Smith plan. A soil resistance survey undertaken by volunteers led by Mike Turpin identified high resistance anomalies in this area, but similarly failed to provide a detailed plan of the walls. In contrast our GPR survey in 2015, provided clear images and confirmed the accuracy of his illustration. This suggested that the building uncovered remained well-preserved and *in situ*.

## Specific aims

- To gain a clearer understanding of the nature of Ecroyd-Smith's excavation methods
- To assess the extent of surviving undisturbed deposits in the area he examined
- To understand the terracing in the field that runs across the area he examined

## Methods

The location of the 19<sup>th</sup> century excavations have been confirmed by the GPR survey, so we were therefore able to locate the trench with precision. The trench was 5 x 2m and oriented just off north-south following the orientation of the mosaics and known archaeology. The turf was cut and removed by hand, and stacked to be reinstated after the excavation. Excavation was carried out by hand, using pick axes, shovels and trowels.

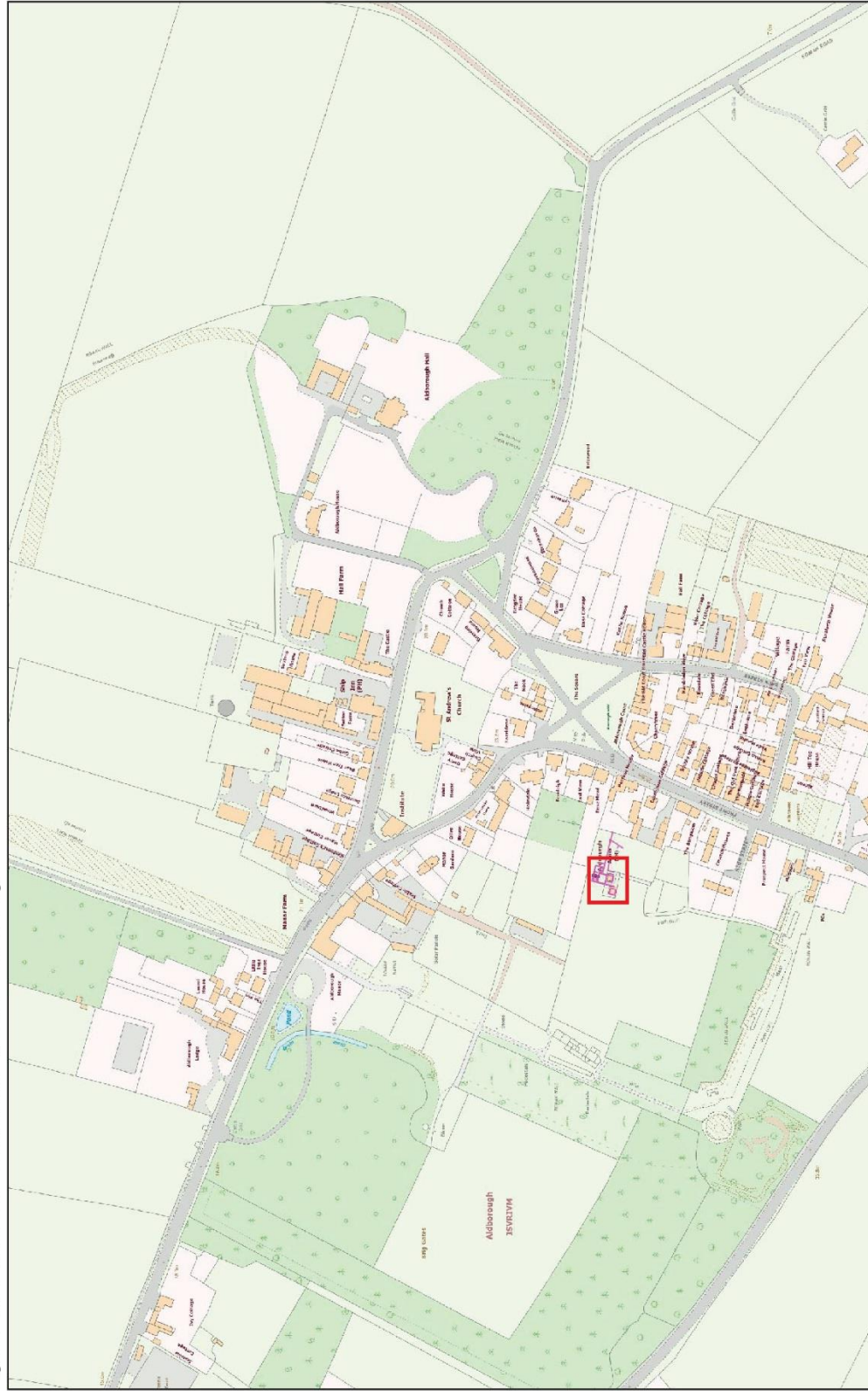
The trenches were recorded using a single context recording system (Landscape Research Centre Archaeological Records Service). Planning was carried out with a combination of the total station and photogrammetric recording. The detailed 3D models produced have been used to create simplified plans and sections of the trench.

The finds from each context have been counted and weighed. Spoil heaps for each context were kept separate and were metal detected on site, so that finds could be allocated to their excavated context.

The trench was backfilled using a mini-digger, and the turf replaced.

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Figure 1: Location of excavation within Aldborough



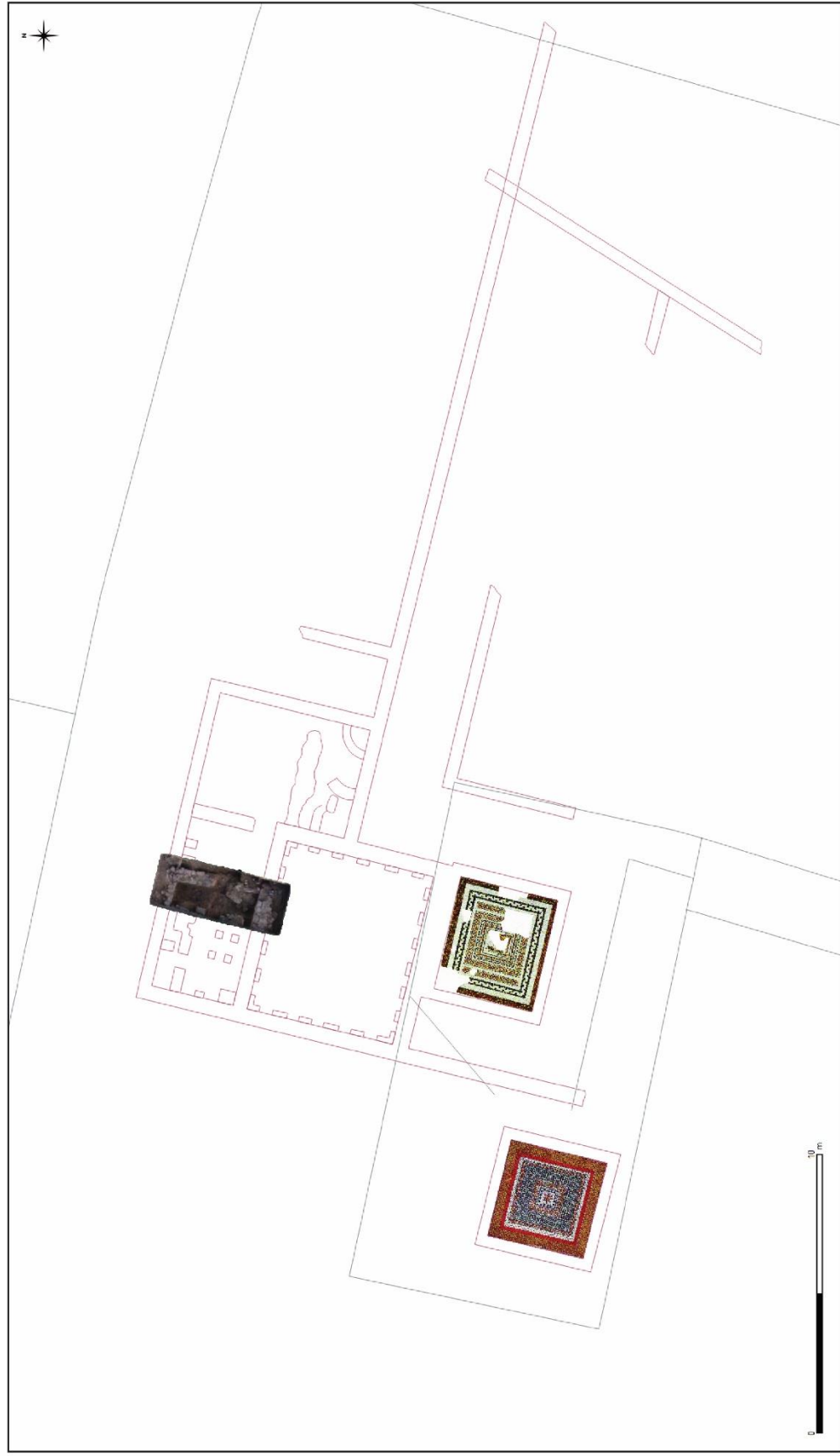
OS imagery: Edina Digimap

Area of Figure 2: Detailed view of excavation area



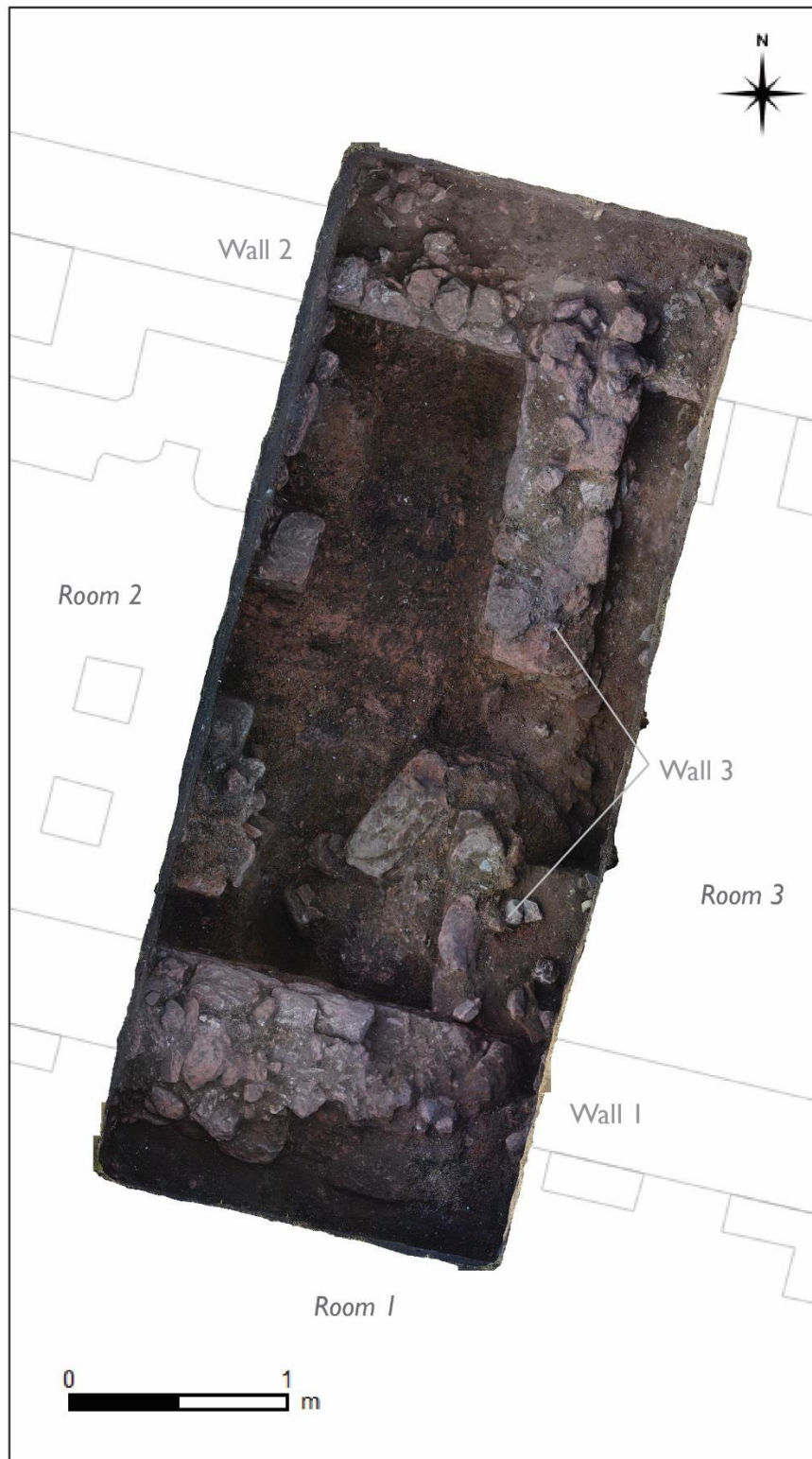
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Figure 2: Location of excavation in relation to Eckroyd-Smith plan and mosaics



OS imagery: Edina Digimap  
Mosaic images: Neal and Cosh 2002  
Photogrammetry: Landscape Research Centre

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Figure 3: 2016 Excavation



## ALDBOROUGH 2016 TRENCH AA

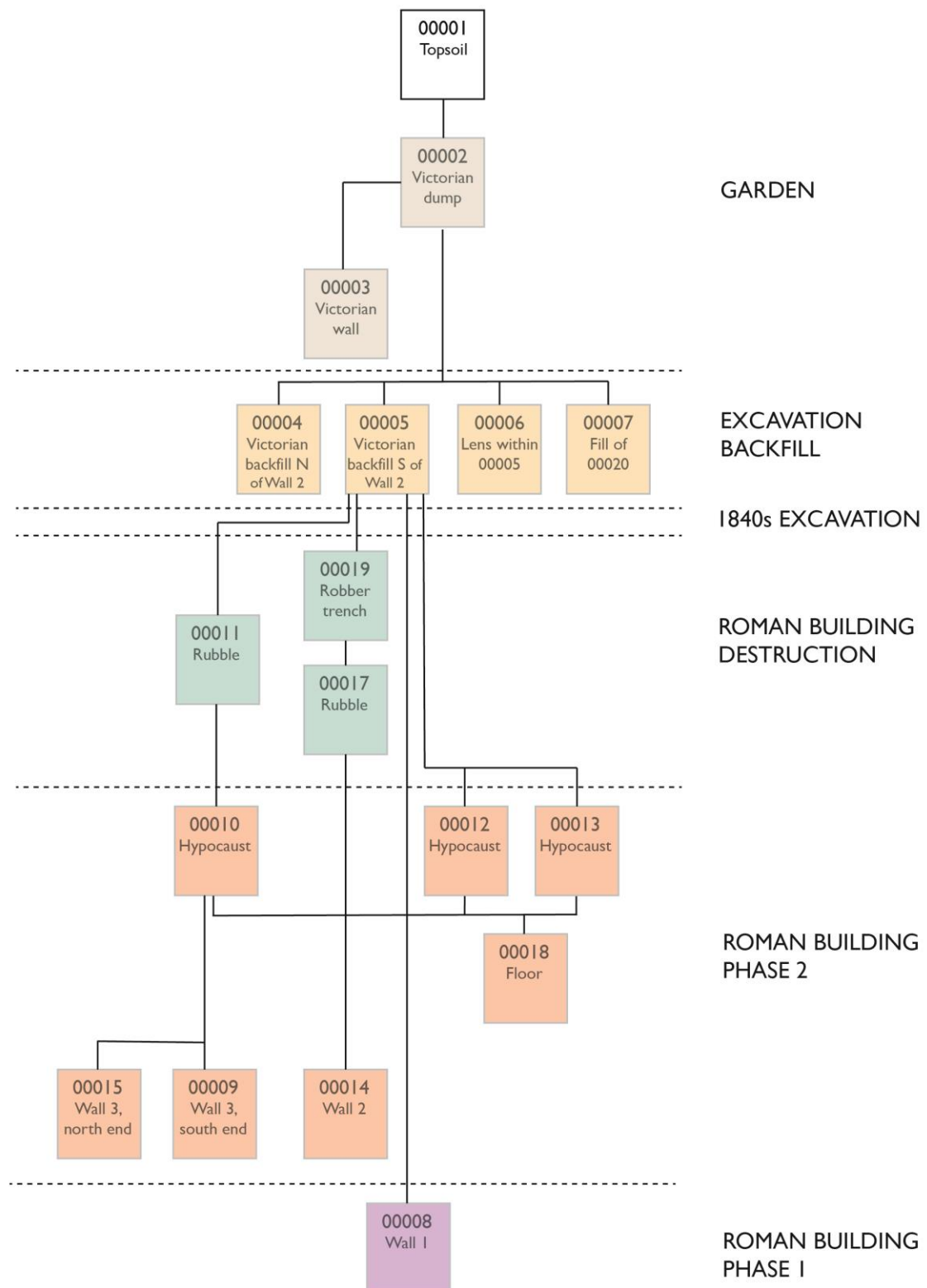


Figure 4: Matrix for Trench AA



## Results

See *Figures 2 & 3*

The 2016 trench was located north of the two mosaics, at a point where it intersected three rooms on the range shown in Ecroyd-Smith's plan (see *figure 2*).

## Discussion

The discussion of the excavation results will begin with the Roman contexts and work back up through the sequence.



*Figure 5: Trench viewed from the south-west looking north-east*

The trench was excavated to expose the previously excavated Roman walls and onto the unexcavated levels (see *figure 5* above). The first thing that is very apparent on figures 2 and 3 is how well the Ecroyd-Smith plan matches the excavated structures. We revealed three walls and the edges of three rooms. To the south, *Wall 1* runs east–west, dividing Room 1 from Room 2. There was not space to fully excavate Room 1, so the levels in this area remain in the Victorian backfill layer. On the north side of *Wall 1* the masonry is more visible, and shows evidence of the floor level: the footings extend 0.03–0.04m from the upper levels and a surviving layer of mortar is present (see *figure 6* below). The southern face of the wall shows evidence for a series of vertical recesses as indicated on the Ecroyd-Smith plan (Plate XV, opposite p.35). Although not excavated, these clearly represent vertical flues designed to carry hot air up the inner face of the walls.



*Figure 6: North face of Wall 1 showing the floor level footings with mortar*

Wall 2 runs north of and parallel to Wall 1. Its southern face is well preserved, but it has been robbed out on the northern side, and lay in undisturbed deposits towards the edge of the trench. It too has an offset with traces of mortar showing the floor level. Bonded into this wall is Wall 3, which runs north-south through the trench and is clearly contemporaneous. The offset for the floor level is visible at the same level in this wall as in Wall 2. At the south end, Wall 3 abuts Wall 1, showing that Wall 1 was built earlier. Interestingly, although Walls 1 and 2 are parallel to one another, Wall 3 is on a slightly different alignment. Wall 3 separates Rooms 2 and 3 (see below).

Wall 3 is characterised by two openings below floor level that form part of a channelled hypocaust. The most northerly of these is represented by a void within the standing wall, clearly visible on the west side (see figure 7 below). It is probable that this continues through to the east side, but previously unexcavated deposits in Room 3 was not excavated to this level. What now appears as a gap in Wall 3 may also have been a similar void, that has suffered from later collapse. The interpretation of these features as the flues of a channelled hypocaust fits with the wider context of evidence in Room 2. As identified on Ecroyd-Smith's plan, the room contains a series of masonry blocks that would support the floor above the hypocaust system. These equate in level with the offsets in Walls 1-3, clearly showing the floor level in Room 2 above a channelled hypocaust. Such detail is impossible to glean for Rooms 1 and 3, due to the limited areas exposed.





Figure 7: Northern hypocaust channel in western face of Wall 3

In the broader context of the Ecroyd-Smith plan and the GPR results in this area, these structures and rooms can now be interpreted in more detail. They form the north-west corner of a large townhouse. Ecroyd-Smith's plan shows the north-west corner of a large courtyard surrounded by a portico and which appears to have fronted onto the Principal North-South street of the Roman town (modern day Front Street). Ranges of rooms are visible in the GPR running along the northern and western sides of this courtyard. The presence of the hypocaust and the arrangement of rooms has led us to the conclusion that these rooms formed a bath suite. The room containing the lion mosaic (Neal and Cosh 2002: mosaic 123.13) was either a changing room or a cold room; Room 3 a warm room; and Room 2 - and that to the east - a hot room. We can hypothesise that the stoke hole might be found to the east of the rooms excavated by Ecroyd-Smith.

The two mosaics in this area have been dated by Neal and Cosh (2002: 314) to the late second or early third century AD. The excavation yielded residual Roman pottery, two Roman coins and CBM all from Victorian backfill contexts. We are currently awaiting analysis of the finds: the CBM may perhaps provide further help with dating the structures. Thus the limited re-excavation and interpretation of Ecroyd-Smith's original investigations, along with the GPR survey, is providing more detailed insight into this area of *Isurium Brigantum*.

The majority of material removed from the 2016 trench was Victorian. This can be divided into two main groups. Directly above the Roman walls and surfaces was the backfill from Ecroyd-Smith's excavation. This was a mixed deposit with a range of Roman, medieval and post-medieval finds. It seems that the backfill was probably loosely compacted and soon

slumped to form a significant dip in the ground. The second main Victorian group came from a dump, with material ranging from ash and cinder tips, broken pottery, beer glasses and window glass, clay pipes, iron nails and organic matter. The plot of land on which the 19<sup>th</sup> century excavation was located belonged to the Aldburgh Arms and it seems that these tips contain material echoes of pub life. Close to the top of this layer, a sandstone slab footpath was roughly laid out following the line of Wall 2. The first edition OS map clearly shows a footpath leading from the pub towards the Manor grounds, passing by the location of the sandstone slabs in the trench (see figure 8).

Above these layers, the topsoil is surprisingly deep. Immediately to the north of our trench a garden wall separates the field from a garden the surface of which lies at a lower level, showing that the slope has been terraced. It seems clear from the excavation that this terracing has resulted in the accumulation of soil behind the wall forming a lynchet which explains the depth of the topsoil here. The dating of the establishment of this terracing remains uncertain, but is clearly the explanation of the topsoil depth here.

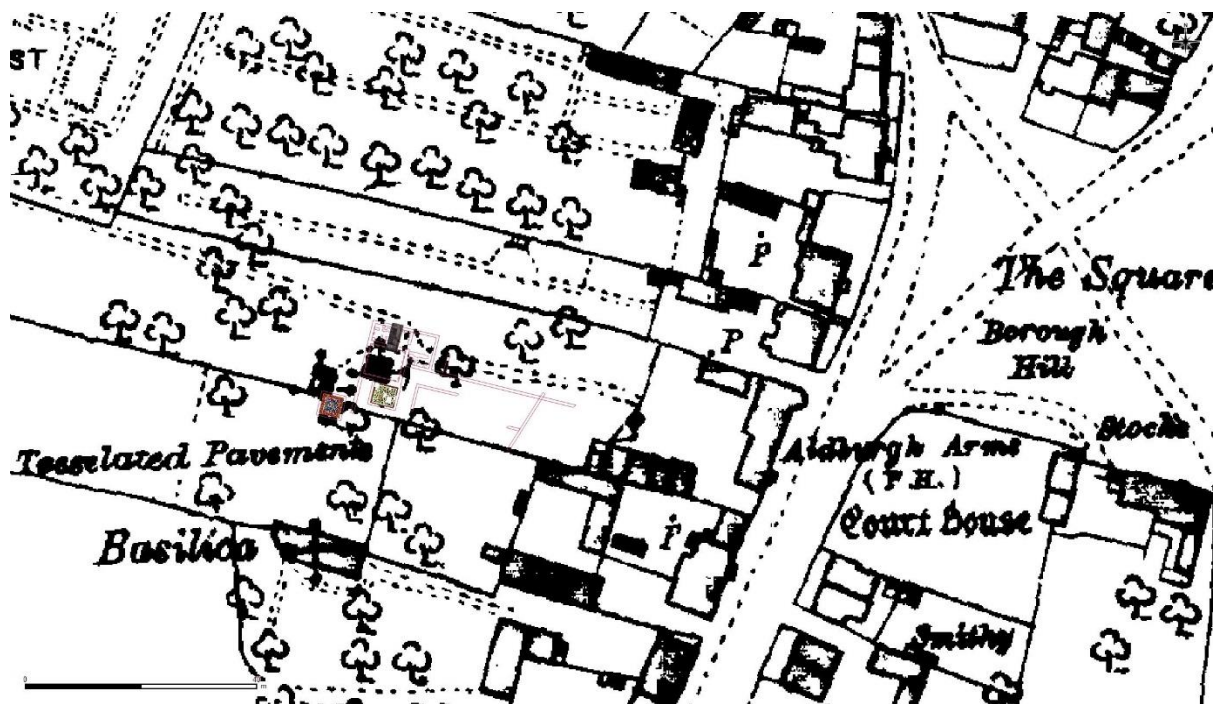


Figure 8: Location of the excavation and Ecroyd-Smith plan in relation to the Aldburgh Arms and land plots (OS data)

## Acknowledgments:

We are grateful to English Heritage for permission to excavate on the guardianship site, and to Liam Cooke (Site Manager) for his help on site. Many thanks to Andrew Lawson-Tancred for allowing us to work on his land, and for his continued enthusiasm and support of the project. Our thanks, as always, to the villagers of Aldborough who always give us such a warm welcome. We are very thankful for the continued support of Friends of Roman Aldborough, who provided volunteer pot-washers, facilities and organised our annual talk on the project.

On site, Jason Lucas volunteered a week of his time to help with the excavation: we thank him for bringing his wealth of knowledge, cheer and humour! Once again, we have been hugely assisted by Dominic Powlesland (Landscape Research Centre), who has given us the benefit of his experience and expertise to develop the records and archives of the site, and for carrying out the photogrammetric survey. We were lucky enough to be joined by Dave Haldenby, Roy Doughty and Chris Hannard, with their skills of metal detecting with archaeological excavations. Their keen eyes and ears, and cheer was much appreciated!



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